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feature story

# The Sandbagger's Guide to The Galaxy

by Jay Shambo



I'm sometimes awakened at night by a reoccurring dream. In it I'm slowly striding through the square cut Dakota Sandstone blocks of Rotary Park - John Gill's old stomping grounds. I'm wearing beat up blue jeans, a faded denim shirt, and a greasy, sweat stained cowboy hat. Clenched between my teeth is the chewed up stump of a cigar. From somewhere beyond the rolling ridges that surround me, the eerie whistling tune from The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly is piped in. I approach my first victim. As he flounders at the base of Right

Eliminator, I stride towards him confidently, glaring with cocked eyes.

"What's this?" My menacing, gravelly voice startles him.

He spins, staggers backward, and stammers, "Nnnnothing. I was jjjjust trying this problem."

"Hmuff." Time to put this poor sucker out of his misery. He senses my power - the desperate look in his eyes give him away. I glance down at my tools. The quivering bag of puss drops his eyes and swallows hard as he sees what I'm packing. No, not a set shiny six- shooters; his eyes fall on a beat up pair of cowboy boots with a nice thick slab of Stealth rubber on the bottom.

"Step aside." I say, then hike the problem in perfect style. I even stop half way up to curl and uncurl my fingers a few times and give them a little blow - just to be sure I finish the poor bumbly off.

Someday I hope to live this dream out in my waking hours. After all, Rotary Park is the honorary home of the Sandbagger. I've been the victim too many times to count, but seldom am I on the other end of the transaction.

When I first moved to Ft. Collins, Colorado ten or so years ago, I was not prepared for what waited. The perfect boulder problems at Horsetooth Reservoir blew my mind and destroyed my fingers, but the caliber of climbers wasted my ego. Okay, the bald guy in flip- flops warming up on my projects was bad enough, but what really did me in was the girls. No, not the girls in bikinis sunning themselves on top of the Eliminator boulder - the girls hiking all the problems I couldn't even get off the ground on. And they always did it so politely. Just a smile and a curt "pardon me" really drove it home.

Since I am so intimately connected with sandbagging, usually on the receiving end, and ever so thoughtful, I thought I might put out a few tips to help you all out. Your ego can thank me later.

## HOW TO AVOID A SANDBAG

First off, sandbaggers are actors. Deniro and old bag of bones Paltrow have nothing on an expert sandbagger. I swear some of these people spend hours in front of a mirror getting their delivery just right. No smile, no smirk, not even a little glint in the eye. Like steel. I'd give anything to have that talent. Then I'd be at least half way successful in my attempts at sandbagging - all I'd need then is strong fingers.

Most sandbaggers have a language all their own. Posers who wish they could climb hard would never lower themselves to admitting that they can't do a given problem - regardless of the grade. Only someone who could redeem himself by thoroughly embarrassing you will do that. So this is a huge red flag. If ever you are flailing on a problem, and out of nowhere are approached by a climber with a confused look on his face and politely asks, "Oh what's this? It looks way too hard for me," be cautious. If it is followed by, "Mind if I give it a try?" Run the other way - unless you enjoy being

embarrassed.

Costume is also a vital asset to the sandbagger. Beware the climber that approaches with old and/or well-worn equipment. If someone has been climbing long enough to wear out a chalk bag, but is climbing in any shoes newer than Fires, you may be in for a surprise. Be assured that a seasoned sandbagger would not be seen dead in the latest, metro inspired, climbing/ martini drinking/ clubbing garb. I'm speaking of all companies with a NYC address. Also, if the company is one of those with ads containing bikini clad models squeezing cleavage into the lens, while their freshly manicured hands hang on a jug just out of the frame, breathe easy. The wearer of said garments probably climbs at the same level as the model.

Sandbaggers are predators. They like to sneak around the boulders and hunt their prey. Keep and eye out for people doing a lot of looking but no climbing. If someone sits and watches you for a while, it's for one of two possible reasons: either he is a bumbly and is thoroughly impressed by amazing skills, or you are being set up for a spanking. If said climber returns a short time later, be doubly suspicious. If you hear, "What's this? It looks too hard for me." Pack up your stuff and run.

Lastly, sandbaggers are territorial. Think of them as the bully dog that nips at your heels. Or pisses on your fire hydrant. Anyway, they all have their local hangs. Areas with high climber populations are obviously the worst. Horsetooth Reservoir, Flagstaff Mountain, and Little Cottonwood Canyon are all known haunts. The Black Hole at Morrison is probably the biggest sandbagger hang in the country. There are people that have been climbing in that place for so long that their fingers have morphed into the shape of the holds. Don't even think about visiting that place if you can't sacrifice some ego.

**BEWARE:** There are enough really strong climbers nowadays that you can get spanked at any climbing area in the country. Yes, there are people that can flash V10, and yes, they will shut you down.

### HOW TO SANDBAG

All right, I have been known to lay one down if the situation occurs. And that is the first thing you must know how to do: You must recognize the situation when it arises. If one sunny day you're out circuiting your favorite problems and you come across someone flailing on a problem you have wired, it's on. It helps to always keep your head up and eyes looking around; it's best if you notice your prey before they notice you. If you do stumble upon potential 'bagging material and are noticed, then it's time to pull out the acting skills.

Sometimes you have no choice but to resort to the old Oscar performance. Practice regularly in front of a mirror if needed. Keeping a calm demeanor is essential. Don't laugh, giggle or otherwise show any outward emotion, unless you've been pounding beers - it's fine to stumble around like a drunk - that just adds to the act. If you absolutely cannot conceal your glee, hide your face in a shirt, stick it your bag, or quick turn around and start peeing. The latter works especially well if you appear inebriated. At that point it's just icing on the cake.

REMAIN CALM! Do not run over, push old bumbler aside, and hike the problem. Ninety percent of the joy one gets from sandbagging lies in setting up the victim. Watch for a while, ask for the name, grade, and history of the problem. Do not correct erroneous information. That will blow your cover with all but the stupidest people. Say something like, "Well, I guess I'll give it a shot." Don't forget to add a little bonus such as, "Boy, I sure am out of shape these days." Then, finally, ask for beta. Pay carefull attention, and remember to use some of it, even if it sucks. You should have the problem so wired you could climb it upside down with a bushel basket on your head. Using a little bad beta will just add to the performance.

Finally, once on top, get out of eyesight quickly. Pretend that you are basking in post send victory while you dance with glee and delight. Disguise any laughter as sounds of physical exertion, or if you've been knocking back beers, vomiting. If your victim hears or sees any celebrating, you will forever be labeled as a dickweed sandbagger.

### THE REVERSE SANDBAG

I'll probably get my head knocked in with a tire iron for letting this one out. It is such a sweet and addicting occurrence some people would inject it directly into their arteries given the chance. The old reverse is when you spy someone setting you up for a sandbag, but actually toss one off on them.

This one is an insider's secret and I could auction off the directions on Ebay for a mint, but being the generous soul that I am, I'll let you in for a little bit of nothing. Just promise not to use it on me.

First off, if you toss down a 'bagging at your local area with any regularity, this won't work. After a while people tend to catch on and vacate when they see you approaching with a confused look on your face. So, your local area with problems you can throw laps on is out. Either that or you have to keep a low profile and do your regular circuits before ten in the morning; no boulderer is ever out at that god-forsaken hour. So for this one you're definitely going to need to travel a bit and actually have strong fingers.

Now for the mental preparation. Think of yourself as some sort of perverted superhero who knocks off those predators who are just out to ruin someone's day. You're saving the little weak guys who can't fend for themselves. Alternatively, if you are one of those people with way too much spare time who likes to troll climbing message boards, then you already have what it takes. Either way, what you need to do is lure potential sandbaggers out into the open.

Here's one way to do it. Before you grab a pad or shoes or chalkbag, you need to nose around a bit. A bit of a disguise will help - I like those hats with the fake bird crap on them. You know, the ones that say something like "Damn Seagulls." Now you need to search out the loudest climber in the area. Listen for things like, "That V7 I did last week didn't feel all that hard." Or maybe, "These shoes suck. I used to climb way harder in my other ones." If he (or she) has their shirt off, and is wearing designer pants and a stylish knit hat, you've found your mark.

Now, grab your gear and wander around a bit looking at problems that are doable for you but still difficult. If you have a guidebook, all the better. Stand at the base of a climb for a few minutes and pretend to glance back and forth between the book and the climb. What you are actually doing at this point is inconspicuously scanning the area for any climbers looking in your direction.

If you see a potential mark eying you, toss down your stuff and slowly begin unpacking - you want to give the soon to be half a man (or woman) time to get over to you. Usually when they approach, they will loudly and boldly begin spewing beta. Be friendly, but don't say too much - yet. Calmly walk to the base of the problem, ask if those are indeed the starting holds, and take off.

Don't climb too quickly! You want to savor this moment; it doesn't present itself very often. Climb with your best style. There's no pretending this is hard for you. You want to thoroughly beat this poor sucker into the ground. Stop frequently - pause on every hold even - and ask for beta or say, "Is this on?" Or, "This sure is a hard warm up." Shake your hands out or blow on your fingers for added dramatic effect.

When you get to the top, see above suggestion for containing your glee. You have just performed the elusive and desired reverse sandbag. The only downfall of this maneuver is that you will have some annoying loud mouth following you around all day.

Well, I've given you the basics, for free, which usually sell for three times that amount in stores, and as a free, limited, one time only offer, I've included insider secrets known only to seasoned veterans. You've got more than enough information to embark on a long and happy career in sandbagging, but please, don't use it on me. I'm getting old, and I really haven't been climbing much lately, and just about everything is too hard for me these days. I usually get up early to, umm, get to work, and when I find time to climb, I'm way too tired to keep up with all you young pups.

Jay Shambo, early November. 2005

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